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ISSUE BRIEF

# **2017 BEATING THE ODDS ROADTRIP:**

## KEY FINDINGS AND INSIGHTS FOR NAVIGATING EDUCATION AND CAREER

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# 2017 Beating the Odds Roadtrip: Key Findings and Insights for Navigating Education and Career

Becky Bobek, PhD | Joyce Yile Zhou, PhD

Navigating education and career paths presents young people with many choices and challenges. Underserved youth are particularly vulnerable to the challenges that can interfere with navigating their paths effectively.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, young people equipped with the knowledge and skills to overcome obstacles are able to succeed and realize the benefits. Opportunities to build the knowledge and skills for navigational success include experiences that provide for 1) learning more about oneself and the environment, 2) using this information to make informed choices and plans, and 3) optimizing resources to help move along education and career paths.<sup>2</sup> The 2017 Beating the Odds Roadtrip<sup>3</sup> was a real-world opportunity for underserved youth to develop and refine some of these skills.

## Introduction

In summer 2017, three underserved college students (roadtrippers) journeyed across the US and interviewed 16 inspiring professionals (leaders) who overcame past obstacles and achieved education and career success. The roadtrippers engaged in insightful conversations with this diverse group of leaders who shared life lessons and empowering experiences. The roadtrippers' experiences and the leaders' stories of success were designed to help underserved young people 1) gain insights into how they can beat the odds, and 2) recognize that they too have the opportunity to achieve education and career success.

This brief summarizes findings and insights from the 2017 Beating the Odds Roadtrip. Thematic qualitative analysis<sup>4</sup> was conducted with interview data from the leaders and the roadtrippers. These qualitative findings lay the groundwork for further understanding the factors and actions that support beating the odds to achieve education and career success.

## Common Conditions

The leaders and roadtrippers experienced a wide range of common challenges that made it difficult to develop and move forward along their education and career pathways. These included:

- **Negative events/environments** (e.g., absent parents, childhood abuse, war, dangerous neighborhoods, new settings with markedly different and unfamiliar cultures and lifestyles)
- **Personal influences** (e.g., low self-esteem, low self-confidence, low self-expectations, insecurities, identity conflict)

- **Influence of others** (e.g., prejudice and discrimination based on race/ethnicity/gender/religion, underestimated abilities)
- **Finances** (e.g., family poverty stemming from parents' lack of education, immigration to new countries, or lack of work opportunities)

## Roadtripper Themes

Prior to the roadtrip, interviews with the roadtrippers revealed seven themes (see Figure 1) that shed light on how their backgrounds shaped them and their aspirations.<sup>5</sup> In the figure, larger bubbles represent themes with higher frequencies of text pertaining to that theme, and smaller bubbles indicate themes with less frequent relevant text.

**Figure 1.** Common Roadtripper Themes



The roadtrippers emphasized education and career aspirational goals. They were motivated by interests and passions and underscored the importance of supports, role models, and positive experiences. The roadtrippers focused on understanding and expressing themselves and seized the Beating the Odds Roadtrip as an opportunity to learn even more about who they are. The roadtrippers also highlighted the influence that interacting with different systems (the justice system, the foster care system, and the school system) had on them.

## Factors Contributing to Beating the Odds

The leaders' stories pointed to six factors (see Figure 2) that contributed to beating the odds and achieving education and career success:<sup>6</sup>

- Interests and passions were a driving force, influencing the leaders' choices and pursuit of education and career goals.
- Purpose-driven goals motivated the leaders to engage in productive education and career-relevant activities.
- Perceived fit with their environments and their opportunities positively influenced the leaders' attitudes, motivations, and persistence.
- Experiences, considered important learning tools, helped the leaders to learn about themselves, to develop connections with others, and to cultivate support systems.
- Observing role models helped the leaders learn important skills needed for college and career planning, as well as behaviors to cope with challenges.
- Supports, people who provided emotional (e.g., positive reinforcement) and instrumental (e.g., specific knowledge or skills) assistance, positively influenced leaders' education and career pursuits, and strengthened the network of people they were able to rely on during their journey.

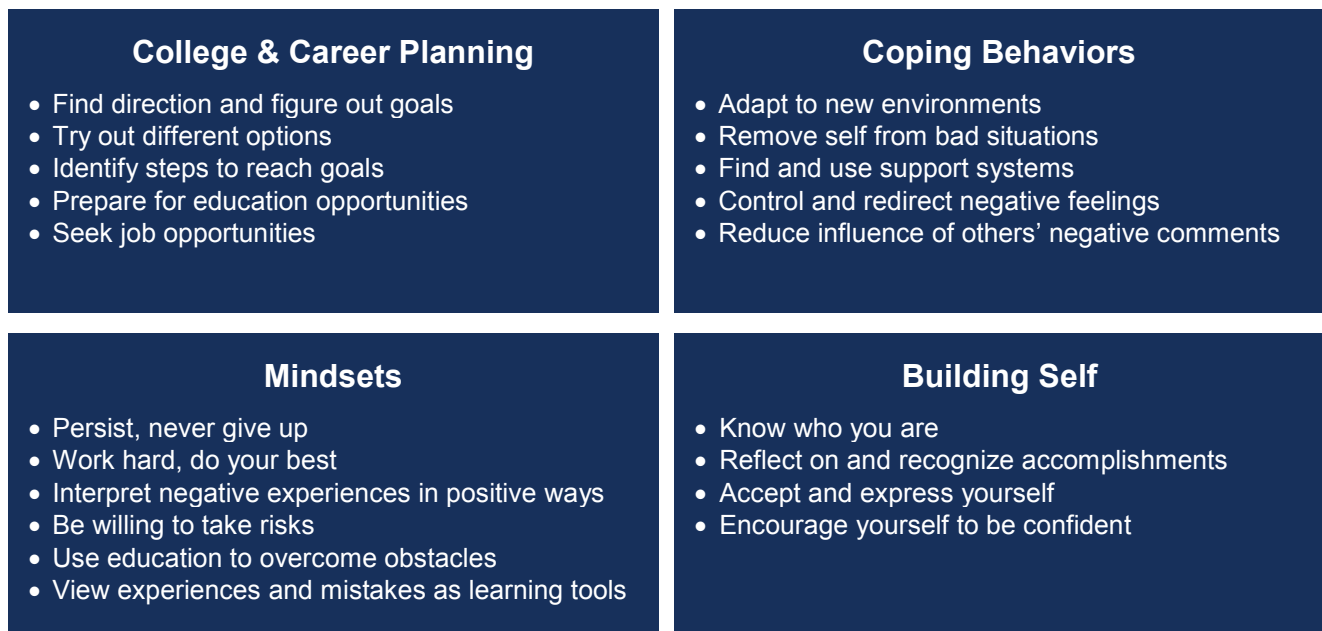
**Figure 2.** Factors Contributing to Beating the Odds



## Beating the Odds Actions

The leaders purposefully engaged in specific self-directed actions as they pursued their education and career goals. Four categories of actions were described, including College & Career Planning, Coping Behaviors, Mindsets, and Building Self. These behavioral or cognitive actions, highlighted in Figure 3, helped the leaders navigate their education and career paths successfully.

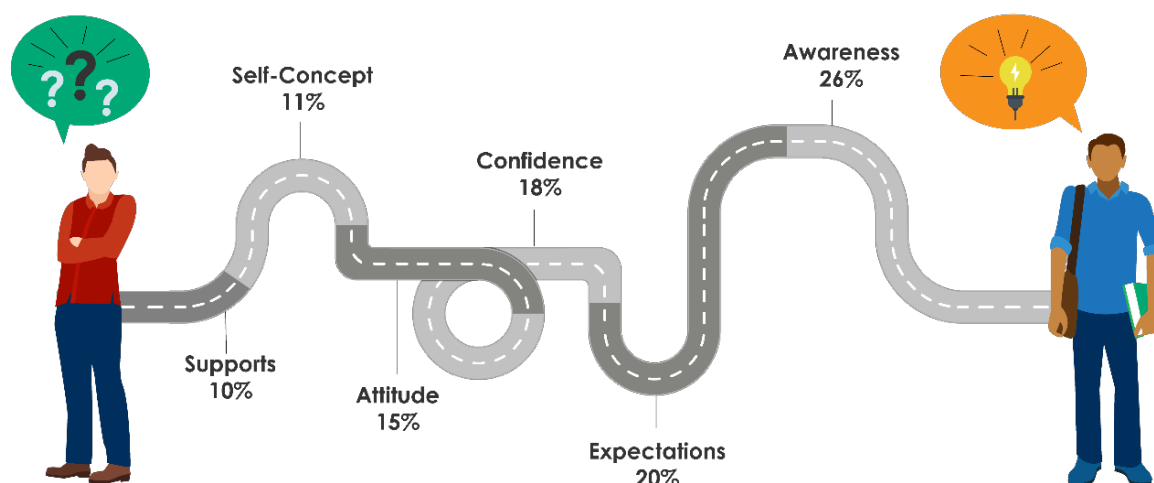
**Figure 3.** Beating the Odds Actions



## Roadtrip Insights

The roadtrippers' insights, drawn from interviews after their roadtrip experience, provided greater understanding of what they learned about themselves, and their perspectives on education and career pathways. Connections between these insights and the factors and actions that contributed to leaders beating the odds were also highlighted.

As shown in Figure 4, the roadtrippers focused considerable attention on Awareness (26%) and Expectations (20%) during the post-roadtrip interviews. They concentrated somewhat less on Confidence (18%) and Attitude (15%), but text related to these insight themes were still referenced over two dozen times. The roadtrippers also emphasized Self-Concept (11%) and Supports (10%) during their interview discussions.

**Figure 4. Roadtrip Insights**

## Attitude

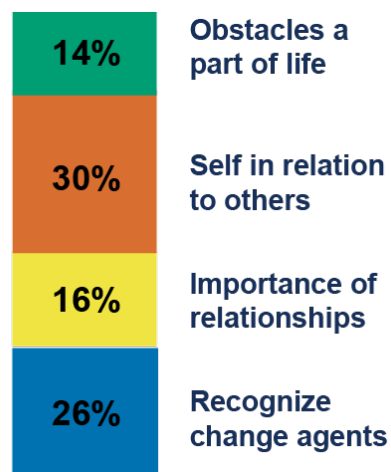
The attitude most frequently cited by the roadtrippers was optimism expressed by learning to think more positively and turning negatives into positives. A second often-cited attitude was persistence, no matter the obstacle.

**Leader-roadtripper insight connection:** The leaders' mindsets overlapped with the roadtrippers' insights regarding their attitudes. Listening to the leaders' stories reinforced the roadtrippers' thinking about never giving up and interpreting challenges in constructive ways.

## Awareness

The roadtrippers frequently mentioned becoming more aware of themselves in relation to others and how change agents may be people, places, and experiences. They also came to understand the importance of relationships for learning from others and for help and that obstacles are going to be a part of life (see Figure 5).

**Leader-roadtripper insight connection:** The leaders described a wide range of negative experiences that they had to negotiate as they pursued their education and career goals. Throughout their journey, they sought out and relied on supports from different sources. Leaders' descriptions were consistent with roadtrippers' new perceptions and understandings.

**Figure 5. Roadtrip Insight: Awareness**

## Expectations

The roadtrippers expected that they would advocate for people and give back to their communities in the future (see Figure 6). They also expected to apply what they learned to their lives going forward.

**Leader-roadtripper insight connection:** The roadtrippers' expectations were also consistent with the leaders' goals and experiences. The leaders encouraged and reinforced the roadtrippers' ideas and plans about contributing to the well-being of others.

## Supports

In addition, the roadtrippers learned about the importance of support systems. While individuals provide important assistance, a network of people can help address different needs. They also described the supportive bond they developed with each other during the road trip.

**Leader-roadtripper insight connection:** The leaders received supports from a variety of individuals and organizations/programs. When facing different obstacles, the leaders actively sought out support systems as one of their coping behaviors. Learning how the leaders cultivated and relied on support systems helped the roadtrippers think about their own network of supports, and reinforced their need to develop a wider range of supports to assist them along their education and career pathways.

## Self-Concept

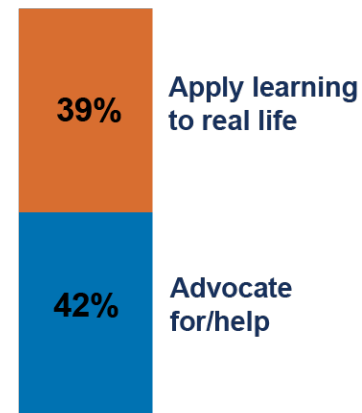
The roadtrippers learned about themselves – what they believed, who they were, and what they could do. They mentioned having pride in themselves, recognized the need to be authentic, and acknowledged that they felt more developed as people as a result of the road trip.

**Leader-roadtripper insight connection:** The leaders reflected on their experiences as a way to develop greater understanding of who they were and what they could do. They offered advice to the roadtrippers about the value of experiences for learning about themselves and encouraged the roadtrippers to be proud of themselves and to recognize their worth.

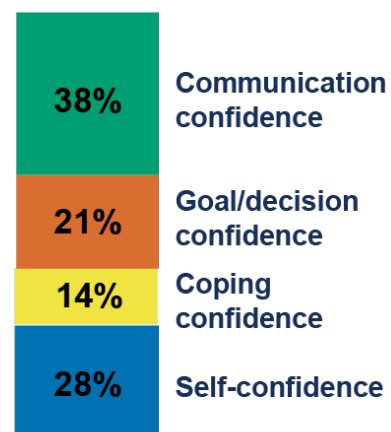
## Confidence

The roadtrippers believed in their abilities in four primary areas (see Figure 7). They were confident about their ability to communicate. They saw themselves as worthwhile, with important stories to share. The roadtrippers were also confident about the decisions they made and their ability to cope.

**Figure 6.** Roadtrip Insight: Expectations



**Figure 7.** Roadtrip Insight: Confidence

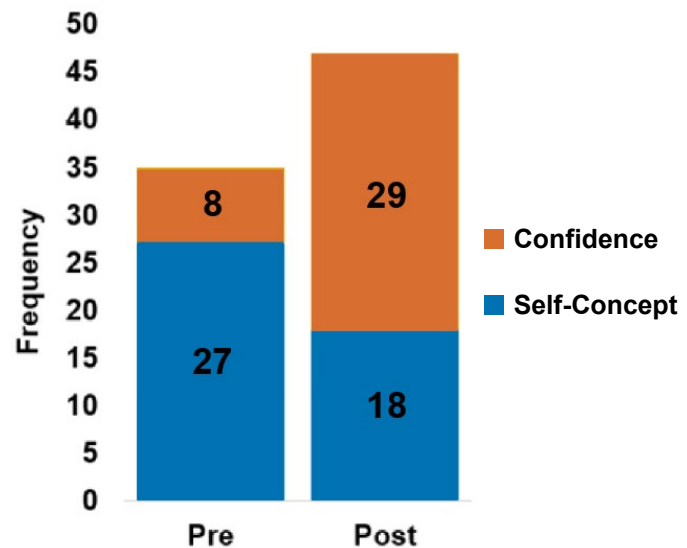


**Leader-roadtripper insight connection:** Leaders believed in their own abilities, knowing they could solve problems and accomplish tasks. They focused on the positive feedback they received and did not allow negative comments from others to distract them. The leaders encouraged the roadtrippers to go confidently forward in pursuit of their goals.

## Shifting Self-Concept and Confidence

There was a shift (based on the frequency of relevant text) in Self-Concept and Confidence that occurred from the pre- to the post-roadtrip interviews (see Figure 8). There was a greater emphasis on self-concept during the pre-interview than the post-interview. This suggests that their need to focus on self-concept—the strong desire to better understand themselves—was reduced by the self-clarity they achieved from the experience. Similarly, during the pre-interview, the roadtrippers' confidence was narrowly focused on certain tasks, but they spoke far more frequently about their confidence and in a wider range of tasks during the post-interview. These results suggest that the road trip experience positively influenced their self-concept and self-confidence.

**Figure 8.** Shifting Self-Concept and Confidence





## Summary

Through the Beating the Odds Roadtrip, it became clear that both the leaders and the roadtrippers faced common challenges with respect to navigating their education and career pathways. The leaders overcame these challenges and provided the roadtrippers with insights and an experience that will support them in meeting and overcoming their own challenges. The roadtrippers revealed that they had education and career goals motivated by interests/passions, a strong desire to learn more about themselves, and recognized the importance of supports, role models, and positive experiences. The beating the odds factors overlapped with these themes as interests/passions, goals, fit, experiences, role models, and supports were identified as contributors to the leaders' education and career navigation success. The leaders also took actions related to college and career planning, invested effort in coping with negative situations and obstacles, developed and applied positive mindsets, and built a strong sense of self. There were strong connections between the factors and actions leading to the leaders' success and the roadtrippers' insights related to their attitudes, awareness, expectations, supports, self-concept, and confidence. These connections suggest that the Beating the Odds Roadtrip was a positive influence on these underserved youth.

For a more detailed discussion of the findings, please use the following link to access the full report: <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1745-beating-the-odds-2019-04.pdf>.

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## Notes

1. Kimberly A. S. Howard, Stephanie L. Budge, Belinda Gutierrez, Amy D. Owen, Nicholas Lemke, Janice E. Jones, and Kory Higgins, "Future Plans of Urban Youth: Influences, Perceived Barriers, and Coping Strategies," *Journal of Career Development* 37, no. 4 (March 2010): 655-676.
2. Becky L. Bobek and Ran Zhao, "Education and Career Navigation," in *Beyond Academics: A Holistic Framework for Enhancing Education and Workplace Success*, ed. Wayne Camara, Ryan O'Connor, Krista Mattern, and Mary Ann Hanson (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2015), 39–51.
3. For nearly two decades, Roadtrip Nation has been creating opportunities for students to authentically explore their interests by offering a unique combination of experiences and inspiration through its initiatives. One such initiative is Roadtrip Nation's thematic road trips, which involves identifying a particular theme and inviting students who represent that theme to participate in road trips every year. During summer 2017, one of those road trips was the Beating the Odds Roadtrip.
4. Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. (London: Sage Publications, 2016).
5. For each interview, meaningful segments of text (phrases, sentences, paragraphs) were identified and then compared. All interviews were analyzed individually and then compared across groups for patterns. Through critical reflection, and using the Education & Career Navigation domain of the ACT Holistic Framework as a guide, common themes were identified across the three roadtrippers.
6. For the analysis of leader interviews, a combination of descriptive, process, emotion, concept, and structural coding were applied to the qualitative data.

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### Becky Bobek, PhD

Becky Bobek is director of the Learning, Assessment, and Navigation Experiences Research department, where she supports the scientific understanding of conditions and processes that influence people's education and work experiences. With a research and practitioner background, her work focuses on how people navigate their education and career transitions successfully – what individuals know about themselves and their environments, and how they use this information to make informed decisions, plan actions, and move along their different paths.

### Joyce Yile Zhou, PhD

Yile (Joyce) Zhou is a research scientist I in the Learning, Assessment and Navigation Experiences team at ACT. Her research interests include K-12 learning experiences and young people's education/career navigation.

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## About ACT Research

ACT Research leads the field with authority and high-quality scientific evidence in support of education and workforce practices, solutions, and services. Our mission-driven team comprises a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, and offers a wide spectrum of knowledge and skills, enabling us to deliver quality, high-impact products and services aligned to ACT's strategy and mission. Together, our research teams provide policymakers, educators, parents, and learners with research-based insights to inform their decision-making, and deliver educators and workforce development professionals with tools and services needed for education and career navigation.

## About ACT's Center for Equity in Learning

ACT's Center for Equity in Learning focuses on closing gaps in equity, opportunity and achievement for underserved populations and working learners. Through purposeful investments, employee engagement, and thoughtful advocacy efforts, the Center supports innovative partnerships, actionable research, initiatives, campaigns, and programs to further ACT's mission of helping people achieve education and workplace success.

## About Roadtrip Nation

Roadtrip Nation, a nonprofit organization, is working to change the way people approach choosing a career by creating content, products, and experiences that guide individuals in exploring what's possible when they follow their interests. They took their first road trip in 2001, and have driven over half a million miles and made more than 30 documentaries — broadcast over 100,000 times on public television — sharing the stories and advice of inspiring leaders in all kinds of careers. Roadtrip Nation's career discovery resources are fueled by an online archive of thousands of video interviews and stories, with personalized career exploration, educational programs for middle school through college that are accessible to millions of students, plus live tours and events all around the country. They're the authors of four books, including the New York Times best-selling career guide, "Roadmap." Along the way, Roadtrip Nation has benefited from world-class partnerships with great companies and foundations that have supported their mission to empower people to define their own roads in life.

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